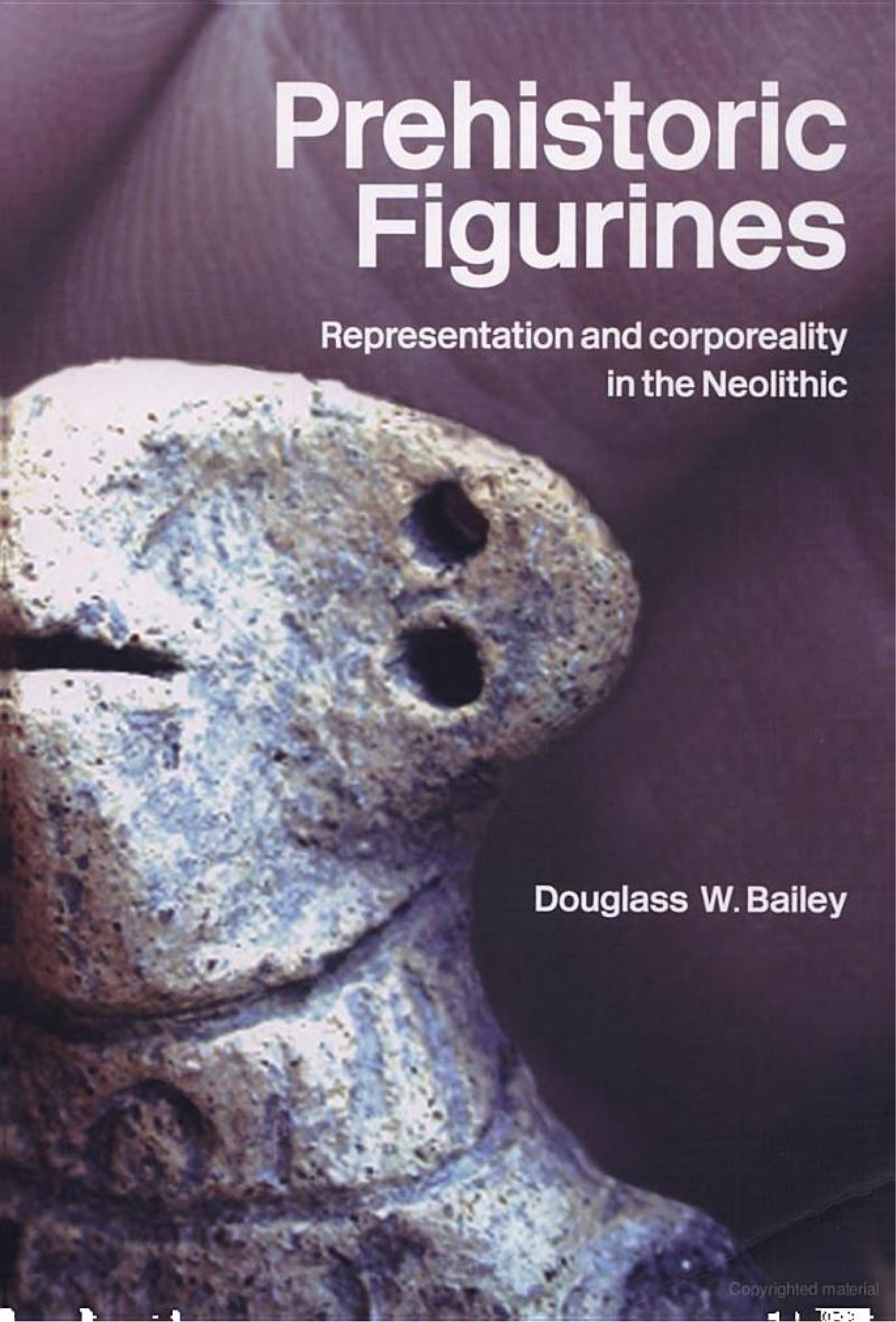

Prehistoric Figurines

Representation and corporeality in the Neolithic

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INTRODUCTION

Looking up from my fieldbook, I saw one of the students running, full tilt. She was coming from the other side of the valley, from the flat lands, across the river. Was it Jo, one of the Third-Years? She was struggling, arms flailing awkwardly as she tried to keep her balance, fists clenched; unsuitable boots made her progress a challenge. Every couple of steps her foot would catch a rabbit hole hidden in the grasses or she would half-trip on an old plough furrow. She stopped across the stream bed from us. Red-cheeked, face streaked with dirt, frizzy red hair matted to her forehead, bent over, hands on knees, head up, wheezing in sharp, shallow gasps, she forced out an explanation. '. . . found . . . grid 145 . . . eroded surface. . . . Steve says get you . . . bring camera, more bags . . .'

Leaving the mapping team to log in the rest of the river course, I drove the Land-Rover, through the ford, up the bank opposite and threw the door open for Jo to haul herself up and in. Bumping our way back across the grassland, we could see the Grab Team up ahead, clustered around Steve, some on their hands and knees, others bent down pushing back the grass looking at the ground. Still wheezing (why do asthmatic students smoke?), Jo filled me in.

She had been working with Steve's team recording one of the 7,000-year-old Neolithic settlements that we had found in the valley bottom the week before. On the surface of the ground, the site was nothing more than pottery sherds, flints and clumps of burnt clay-and-straw building material. Today's collection of all the finds from the area and the mapping of the densities of finds would reveal how large this new site was and it would give us some idea about where to drop test-trenches if we decided to have a better look later in the summer or perhaps during the next season.

Earlier in the day, in the cool, quiet, early light just after dawn, I had left Steve and his team laying out the collection grid, marking grid numbers on the grass with spray-paint, assigning teams of grabbers to the squares, labelling and handing out finds bags and starting notebook entries. Jo said that after about two hours, work had stopped when one of the First-Years had let out a yell. Either the student had cut the hell out of her hand, had disturbed a snake or a rat, or she had found something extraordinary. Jo finished her report as we slowed to a stop by Steve's team: the survey team had turned up a small, badly preserved, fragment of a clay female figurine (fig. 1.1).

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Figure 1.1 Figurine discovered by the Southern Romania Archaeological Project, Teleorman Valley.

Introduction

Why do prehistoric figurines evoke such strong emotions? Why, in this example from our work in Romania's Teleorman Valley, did the discovery of one, broken, out-of-context, surface-find create such a stir among the students? Most of them knew that the significant finds would be tallies of numbers, the densities of the more mundane sherds and flint scrapers? Why do specialist studies of figurines account for a disproportionately large number of pages and illustrations in excavation reports? Why are objects such as figurines deemed appropriate, desirable enough, to be included in Sotheby's or Christie's auctions, to take pride of place in museum cabinets and displays? Why are you reading this book? Why, indeed, am I drawn to write it?

The answers to these questions come from an investigation not so much about figurines themselves, in the sense of stylistic typologies or imaginative reconstructions, but about figurines as dynamic visual events. Because of this, the book before you is about many apparently disconnected subjects, discontinuous periods, separate regions and places. There will be no exhaustive compilation of figurines, their find-spots, and no discourse on culture-historical similarities among figurines from neighbouring or distant sites. Valuable though such descriptive studies are for making typological, cultural and chronological comparisons, I am looking for a different kind of answer, a different type of meaning.

The goal is to understand how and why objects such as figurines evoke the strong responses that they inevitably stimulate in you, in me and undoubtedly in their

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prehistoric makers and users. In understanding the how and why of figurines as visual culture, we will find a better understanding of Neolithic figurines. In a better understanding of Neolithic figurines from southeastern Europe, we will refine our understanding of the people who made, looked at, used, held, thought about and threw away these objects.

Starting in the middle of the seventh millennium BC, people in southeastern Europe made clay, bone and stone anthropomorphic figurines. Though figurines were produced in other periods of Europe's prehistoric past (e.g., the Upper Palaeolithic and its so-called Venuses), the Balkan Neolithic provides the largest body of material: hundreds of thousands of figurines were made. In the Balkans,[1] the phenomenon is tightly restricted to the Neolithic (6500–3500 BC); figurines appear with the first settled, pottery-making farmers and they disappear abruptly with the abandonment of the Neolithic way of life that marks the start of the early Bronze Age in the middle of the fourth millennium BC.[2] What was it about the Balkan Neolithic? What are the social, economic, material and political contexts in which Neolithic figurines were made? How did the people of the Neolithic Balkans live?

The Neolithic of Southeastern Europe

At a general level, the Balkan Neolithic is a collection of communities that lived their lives in similar ways.[3] Diversity along regional and chronological dimensions distinguishes different groups. Important variations lie in the ways people shaped and decorated pots, in the size, shape and permanence of their habitations, in the manner in which they handled death and displayed status, and in the intensity of exploitation of food resources. The traditional approach to this diversity identifies formal variation in material culture, mainly ceramic vessels, and assumes that these variations distinguish different cultural groups of people. Archaeologists thus generate schematic correlations that arrange cultures in time and separate them across the space. At the pan-regional level, there is more similarity than difference. Viewed at a finer resolution, of course, there was tremendous variation along these dimensions: between different parts of a region, within single river valleys or plateaux, between two adjacent settlements, between individual houses, huts, and even between individuals within a household. At the regional level, however, the similarities force us to think of a broadly common way of life.

Though the different Neolithic communities of the Balkans share many characteristics, they are distinct from those that occupied the region in the millennia before 6500 BC. These distinctions are important; they suggest that the people living in the region after the middle of the seventh millennium BC thought about the world in radically new and different ways, indeed that they possessed a new philosophy of life. On the ground, there was no absolute transition of a way of life; there was no revolution as we understand that concept. The changes were radical, with fundamental, if unintended consequences, but they occurred over a long period time, in various spurts and retardations, emerging in some areas sooner than in others and co-existing with other, particularly pre- and non-Neolithic, ways of life. Figurines were one of several key components in this new way of living.

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The built environment

One of the most important components of the new philosophy was the relationships that linked people to particular parts of the landscape: the explicit marking of repeated engagement and alteration of the terrain. The non-Neolithic Balkans was defined by temporary occupations and mobile existences that made short-term uses of caves and open-air sites; the Neolithic was about huts, camps and villages. It was about settling down.[4] Neolithic people physically built their own social environments; architecture offered shelter but, more importantly, provided the mechanisms for people to engage and create place. Some Neolithic built environments were little different from the places that mobile Upper Palaeolithic groups had used: small huts with simple, single-roomed floor plans, lined pits dug into the soil, covered with a roof, surrounded by walls made of saplings.[5] Distinct and novel for the Neolithic, however, were more substantial structures of one or two rooms, built at ground level, containing simple interior features such as a hearth or an oven. Both pit- and surface-level structures formed loose aggregations without formal spatial arrangement; most accurate analogies are drawn to short-term camps, places lived in, abandoned, reused and then abandoned again perhaps on a seasonal basis.

At the same time in other parts of the Balkans, people created more substantial built environments with larger buildings (up to 10 m on a side) made of thick wooden posts, sunk into foundation trenches, interspersed with smaller wooden poles around which were entwined branches and twigs which, in turn, were covered with a mixture of mud, clay and grasses. In some buildings, sun-dried mud bricks or stone foundations made walls more stable and structures more permanent. Many buildings contained four, five or more rooms in which particular areas were dedicated to specific activities such as parching, grinding and storing of plant foodstuffs. Larger, more permanent structures were grouped together in highly organized ways, forming villages, often tightly packed with little extra open space. In other cases, building arrangement left significant areas of open space, areas in which people shared activities and resources, ate and talked.

Significantly the larger, more orderly arrangements of buildings had long lives. Older structures were repaired; replacements were constructed directly on top of buildings that had collapsed or, frequently near the end of the Neolithic, had been burned down intentionally. In many places, when buildings were replaced, great effort was made to rebuild in precisely the same location with earlier floor plans carefully replicated. With many regenerations of buildings, villages grew into substantial tells rising from the landscape, becoming highly visible statements of monumental settlement. Tell villages represent communities' commitments to particular places for settlement; attention to location and forms of rebuilding established links between living and past generations of village residents.

Though commitments to settlement and architecture are common across the Balkan Neolithic there is variation in the degree and in the timing of their appearances. In northern Greece, for example, substantial, long-lived villages made with durable stone and mud brick occurred early, from the second half of the seventh millennium BC. To the north, along the lower Danube, such substantial construction materials never appeared and monumental tells did not emerge until the middle of the fifth millennium BC, 1,500 years after pit features and surface structures first appeared in the area. Neither to the north nor south did tells dominate; Neolithic Balkan landscapes were mixtures of

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different degrees of settlement permanences. To the west in Serbia, for example, tells appeared at the same time (and in the same landscapes) as did less permanent habitations, though tells were less frequent than flat settlements that spread horizontally through successive phases of building. In southern Bulgaria another pattern reveals only tells.[6] Perhaps the most accurate reconstruction of Balkan Neolithic settlement patterns includes different manifestations of the built environment depending on variation in activities, seasons or political reasons.

The social and political significance of Neolithic Balkan architecture cannot be overemphasized. Houses and villages created tangible, physical, and relatively permanent boundaries around groups and their activities. The physical presence of houses established and reinforced cohesion of small co-resident groups. Houses pulled together group members at the same time as separating them from other groups. Membership in households was maintained over time by repeated rebuildings that secured physical links with earlier generations of houses (i.e., the long-term occupation of tells), or by repeating the form and size of a structure nearby (i.e., a thin, horizontal spread of occupation). Houses incorporated individuals into groups at the same time as they excluded other individuals. Similarly, aggregations of buildings incorporated individual houses (and their households) into the larger social institution of the village.

The social and political consequences of the Neolithic developments in Balkan architecture were fundamental. Benefits of incorporation were shared resources and labour, reduced risk for an individual or household, and other co-operative spin-offs of communal living. More dramatic were negative consequences: tensions and conflicts inherent in shared living, competition for limited resources, the ill-ease that exclusion generates. To realize the benefits, to reduce the tensions, and to overcome the threats to community coherence, Neolithic village living required not only new materials but also less tangible, political mechanisms. Resolution of conflict and tension was a major part of Neolithic life and was played out with new objects and raw materials, developments in attitudes to the dead, and changes in the scales of economic activities.

A new materiality

As significant as the adoption of architecture was a dramatic increase in the number and range of objects that people made and used. The most important element of this change was the adaptation of a ceramic pyrotechnology (Vitelli 1989, 1993, 1995). Balkan Neolithic potting developed through two stages: an early experimental encounter of the technology followed by a longer phase during which the elaboration of forms, techniques and uses expanded. The experimental phase consisted of casual attempts at potting; a few people making one or two vessels of simple design, irregular construction and uneven firing. Most likely, the first potters were people with experience in locating, gathering and processing other, special, raw materials; they knew where to find plants for food and, particularly, for medicines and for making mood-altering substances. Esoteric knowledges needed for collecting and transforming a raw resource such as a plant into a consumable, medicinal potion could easily have been adapted into the knowledges required for locating, collecting and processing a new raw material, such as clay. The abilities to find, extract and work clay and then transform it, by firing, from a natural, malleable, perishable medium into a permanent one were special skills. As Karen Vitelli has argued, early potter-gatherers may have played special roles in Balkan Neolithic communities.

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In the fifth millennium BC, however, important developments in mortuary ritual are evident. Most striking are the inhumations of the deceased in extra-mural cemeteries, often with disproportionate distributions of grave-goods. Large concentrations of burials (up to 600 graves) are dramatic though it is difficult to determine whether the number of bodies reflects a long period of use for one cemetery or whether it signals the deposition of a high proportion of a single community over shorter phases. It is clear, however, that death and its celebration now played a significant role in strategies to maintain, manipulate or contest claims for social status and social positioning within and between village communities. Men, women and children were buried in cemeteries, but there are clear disparities in the numbers and types of associated grave-goods: adults were buried with a larger number and more exotic grave-goods than were children; adult women were buried with fewer, less exotic grave-goods than were men; men were buried with special objects such as large copper chisels and axes, golden jewellery and body appliqués. While these patterns are not absolute (some women were interred with concentrations of exotic objects) in terms of effort invested, the mortuary realm now received greater attention than it had in the previous millennia and more of that investment was directed to adults than to children and more to men than to women.[9]

The extra-mural dislocation of death from the village and the space of the living is significant and suggests that by the fifth millennium BC, many Neolithic communities listened to both cemetery-centred, publicly expressed, ceremonial statements of status and power-relations as well as more house- and village-focused, more private, quieter, versions of reality (Bailey 1994a). The publicly broadcast version involved the consumption of the new especially expressive materials (gold, copper, *Spondylus*) which were deposited during the death ceremonies of particular individuals. Along with the elevation of the public mortuary ritual as a main stage for social positioning, it is not surprising that mock burials took place at times when the need for reaffirmation of status was greatest (i.e., the often misunderstood, so-called, cenotaphs).

Plants and animals

In the light of developments in architecture, material culture and burial, the changes in exploitation of plants and animals in the Balkan Neolithic were not as dramatic as traditionally assumed.[10] True, new technologies for exploiting plants and animals and the introduction of new species are important distinctions of life in the Balkans after 6500 BC. Domestication of local animals such as pig, dog and cattle, the introduction of animals of foreign origin, such as sheep and goat, were matched by the introduction of novel cultivation technologies and plant species: wheats, barleys and legumes. New species and new technologies required new knowledges and skills. Individuals able to manage plant-growing and animal-rearing occupied new positions within communities. If the traditional economic division of food-gatherers from food-producers still holds any value for defining the revolutionary difference of the Neolithic, then that value rests in the social and political consequences of growing plants and grazing animals.

In important ways, new animal species represented no change; eating the meat of herbivores was nothing novel. The way in which the meat was packaged, however, was different; the role of cattle and its large body-size had important social repercussions for animal slaughter and meat distribution. To consume one bovid required the aggregation of a large group; meat distribution of a large animal thus provided opportunities to be

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grasped and problems to be avoided. Again, there is continuity with previous millennia, specifically with the distribution and consumption of large-bodied animals such as red deer. The significant difference is that the domesticated animals of the Neolithic were investments of labour, care and fodder; events of meat distribution followed new rules and entitlements, values and consequences.

In the Neolithic, the character of the relationship between people and animals had changed. Connection of human to domestic animal was established well before the events surrounding the kill; in the more mobile communities more common before the Neolithic, the human–animal relationship and, critically, the rules and responsibilities of meat distribution, were established only with the event of the kill or the hunt. In the pre-Neolithic, hunting and the distribution of meat from a large-bodied animal were important mechanisms of group aggregation and for individuals to express status, identity and power. In mobile communities of fluctuating memberships and sizes, meat distribution was a critically important social and political mechanism. In the Neolithic, the distribution of meat from large animals was also important but its significance was complicated by the competing and, perhaps, more forceful mechanisms of social organization provided by the built environment, mortuary ritual and the new materiality.

It is significant that the new animal species (i.e., sheep and goat) introduced intermediate-sized packages of meat, much smaller than cattle but larger than pigs and dogs. The social repercussions of slaughtering and consuming animals of sheep and goat proportions are important: the size of the group fed fits most closely with the size of the groups that focused their lives and activities in Neolithic houses. Compared with earlier millennia, the social and political potency available to individuals distributing meat would have been much reduced. With time, the role of large-bodied domestics, especially cattle, took on new significances, perhaps played out at a village level, of a more public order and more closely matched with the ceremonies taking place in the extra-mural cemeteries than they were with more private, household events. Indeed, by the end of the Neolithic cattle had attained a special importance within Neolithic communities with zoomorphic figurines and, in a few instances, gold appliqués created in their image.

The adaptations of new plant species and technologies are also important for the social and political consequences of their implementation, consequences that varied with the scales of cultivation and the scheduling of activities in the agricultural cycle. As with potting, the exploitation of new technologies and plant varieties in the Balkan Neolithic proceeded through early, experimental, phases before accelerating into more intense and standardized systems of planting, tending, harvesting, processing, storing and consuming. Small-scale garden horticulture tended by individuals required little investment of time, labour or long-term residence. More complex commitments of swiddening required greater investment in preparing the land (perhaps clearing areas of forest and scrub) and longer sequences of residence. Neither system is incompatible with a semi-mobile existence in which small communities spent only parts of seasons in places of cultivation. Nor is either system excluded from a more permanent system where people stayed in one place for several years before moving on, perhaps to return after a year or two. Such patterns of small-scale planting characterized much of the Balkan Neolithic, though more intense regimes appeared early in some regions, particularly to the south.

Dramatic changes in the scale of cultivation occurred at the same time as did the shift to extra-mural cemeteries, the emergence of new expressive material culture and the

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appearance of tell villages in the northern Balkans, namely from the late sixth millennium BC. From this time, significant efforts were made to alter the land before planting and to employ cattle for traction in ploughing. Cows and goats were now exploited for dairy and textile materials as well as for their meat. Indeed part of the increasing status of cattle over time may have been due to the animal's new value derived from its secondary uses; investments of labour, care and foddering made cattle a true (live)stock. Growing wheats and barley in large fields was not unusual and tell villages contained large grain silos full of carbonized grain. Grinding-stones are frequent finds in houses and very large storage vessels are common.

Food production had intensified and with the scale of intensification came important social and political consequences. First among these were the requirements of labour, time and knowledge needed, especially the ability to manage the labour required and to retain, distribute and store the plant-goods produced. Management of labour for large-scale cultivation was complex.[11] Some stages in the agricultural cycle, such as planting or harvesting, were disproportionately labour- and time-consuming; large numbers of people were needed to work intensively over a short period of time. Other stages, including the majority of a crop's growing time, required very few people doing very little. The bringing together and, critically, the sending away of people were potential management problems. Abilities to co-ordinate and coerce human resources were socio-political skills. Special technical skills and knowledges were also required; critical to success were knowledges of when to plant and when to harvest. Miscalculations of either would have been disastrous. Equally important were skills and experience in processing harvested grain: threshing, winnowing and, especially, parching were crucial and not necessarily equally available across a community.

The potential problems inherent in organized, especially large-scale, cultivation required socio-political solutions. Tell villages, as political institutions, may have provided one solution: a focus for residence, for labour, for storage. Other phenomena of the Neolithic undoubtedly contributed. The loud, public expression of status and identities in mortuary ceremony, the accumulation of people and goods in houses and in villages probably advertised the power of a village at the same time as identifying the individuals who were in control of decisions and resources. The role of visually expressive objects and their display contributed to such socio-political solutions. At the same time, it is important to see the darker side of these consequences and solutions. Expressions of status differentiation and management of labour investment were just as easily used as tools of exploitation and coercion as they were mechanisms of co-operation and collaboration. The Neolithic means of incorporating and excluding were ideally suited to creating and maintaining divisions within communities and to establishing disproportionate distributions of resources and materials.

Socio-politics

In the Balkans after 6500 BC people started living their lives in new ways. This included very substantial changes in people's relationships to each other, both within and between groups and especially in the ways individuals thought it appropriate to identify themselves and their own places of residence and activity. Changes included new conceptions of landscape and appropriate ways of inhabiting and exploiting the land and its resources. Significant changes occurred in the particular components of the natural world that

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people chose to exploit, in the ways they exploited them, and in the ways they consumed the resources exploited and the things made. An important part of these changes was a daily life increasingly full of a widening variety of new objects.

The house, the household, the village and, eventually, the cemetery, were the key social institutions of the Balkan Neolithic. Houses and villages created tangible, physical and relatively permanent boundaries around groups, their activities and their possessions. Memberships within households and villages were as much products of incorporation as of exclusion; the physical boundaries manifest in house and settlement were matched by a new perspective of death which viewed the disposal of the corpse as the appropriate focus for ceremonies that expressed differentiation (and similarity) among individuals within and between communities.

If, therefore, the Balkan Neolithic is defined in terms of incorporation and exclusion, then attention must focus on the means of expressing identities, of rights and entitlement to residence and to participation in village life (and death). Burial and settlement practice played major roles in identity expression. Similar roles were occupied at a more mundane, though no less important level, by the material culture of life, not only by the exotic and visually stimulating, but also by the more quotidian objects of living and the ways in which they were used, shared or hoarded, hidden or displayed, preserved or discarded.

From all of these patterns emerges a socio-politics of the Balkan Neolithic in which life was run through with series of tensions and conflicts, contestations and usurpations. Clearly some of this took place on the big stage of mortuary rituals (either in the burial of children in house floors or in extra-mural cemeteries) and of ceremonies of house construction and rebuilding. Other currents of tension ran deep below the surface and can only be sensed in the delicate and incomplete traces of political intention and coercion.

Figurines and their links to the key phenomena

Based only on this general understanding of their Balkan Neolithic context, what can we say about anthropomorphic figurines? Does a better understanding of the key economic and social phenomena of the period begin to move us toward a better understanding of figurines? As ceramic objects, figurines were part of the new Neolithic materiality. As such they were one of many categories of things through which people expressed, maintained, negotiated and contested identities and realities. That they were made of a new durable, transformative and perhaps transgressive material must be significant. That they were one of a number of different, particularly expressive, materials is equally important. Also telling is the fact that, with one major exception, figurines were used and consumed in houses or at the very least within the boundaries of village space; their absence from burials is conspicuous.

Perhaps most importantly, however, figurines are objects that appeared within a period during which critically important questions were continually being asked about who people were, about where people belonged, and about what relationships existed between individuals and among groups. All of these issues must be addressed in moving towards a fuller understanding of Neolithic figurines. That is the purpose of this book.

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Previous approaches to figurines

A detailed assessment of previous research on figurines from the Balkan Neolithic requires a book of its own. Even a descriptive review of the appearance of figurines in local, Balkan, and international publications exceeds both the scope and purposes of this chapter: to highlight the challenges that face figurine research and to suggest how work can move forward.

The present trend in figurine research is historiographic: to research not the figurines themselves but to examine the studies of figurines, the schools of interpretation and proposed interpretations. Important texts on figurine historiography include Richard Lesure's recent article (Lesure 2002), two papers by Meg Conkey and Ruth Tringham (Conkey and Tringham 1995; Tringham and Conkey 1998) and a collection of shorter comments in the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*'s 1996 Viewpoint section entitled 'Can we interpret figurines?' (Bailey 1996; Haaland and Haaland 1996; N. Hamilton 1996; J. Marcus 1996; Ucko 1996). Many analyses concentrate on Goddess interpretations given life by Marija Gimbutas.[12] Some investigate the gendering of figurine studies, highlighting the damage that, paradoxically, Mother Goddessism has done to a feminist archaeology.[13]

Historiographies aside, figurine scholarship consists of excavation reports and interpretive essays. Of these, many propose specific meanings or functions for figurines. In addition to the Mother Goddess interpretations, the common references are to ritual, religion and spiritual life. Most propose anecdotal functions: figurines as dolls, toys, magical items, afterlife accessories, sexual aids, fertility figures, effigies, talismans, ritual figures, concubines, slaves, puberty models, training mechanisms, votive and healing objects, items used in initiation ceremonies, contracts, territory and identity markers (Meskell 1998).

Few attributions of function offer substantive argument to support their interpretations. Many avoid explicit discussion of the assumptions upon which preferred interpretations rest. As explanations, the results are pleasing. Why else the success and continuity of Mother Goddessism? But they are also simplistic, offering anecdote in the place of explanation, avoiding the transparency of approach that a rigorous, reflective method requires or the theoretical reasoning that underpins modern archaeology. Worse still, unreflective approaches are exclusive. Authors provide complete and seamless interpretations; readers are not given the opportunity to trace the ways that the data are joined with particular interpretations. As such, anecdotal interpretations eliminate the potential either for criticism or for the development of alternative meanings for particular figurines. Everything is simple and clear. There is neither debate nor even reason to stimulate debate. The worst news is that the majority of primary publications of figurines follow this anecdotal approach. Why is this the case? What are the alternatives?

A special rhetoric

A critical reader of excavation reports and journal articles on the Balkan Neolithic quickly realizes that figurines possess strange attractive powers that seduce and overwhelm archaeologists and editors. It is as if figurines, on their own, out of context, in publications or museum displays, function with an intangible, inherent and perhaps unquantifiable rhetoric. It is a rhetoric that convinces journal peer-reviewers and publishing house

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huge challenge presented by the overwhelming fragmentation of the material (see Chapman 2000a: 68–79). Most figurines survive as bits and pieces long since broken: arms, heads, thighs, torsos. How does one measure what has not survived? Often the answer is to create types from complete figurines and assume that standardization of size and form is the norm; then an individual disarticulated body-part can be measured and complete figurine measurements deduced. In most Balkan Neolithic figurines attempts to reconstruct a whole from a part is challenging at best. More worrying is the failure to ask if the differences in the variables recorded are important. If, for example, there are strong patterns of size differentiation, then why do these patterns exist? What might they tell us about how Neolithic people thought about the figurines? If the proportion of the size of a particular body-part, such as the head, to the body varies in a significant fashion, what might be the interpretive consequences of recognizing such a pattern? In what ways can such minutely detailed description move our understanding forward?

Critical questions

Significantly, neither the anecdotal nor the empirical approach asks the fundamental questions. What makes an object a figurine? When is something simply an oddly shaped stone, bone or lump of clay and when is it a representation? When is that representation anthropomorphic? Indeed, what is a representation and what are the cognitive or political significances and consequences of making representations? What of viewing representations? Of handling them? When is an anthropomorph a representation of a man and when of a woman? When of a child? When of an animal? Are these categories exclusive?[15] Are they significant? Are there not important problems inherent in the identification and rigid definition of boundaries that are necessary for empirical description? So often, in their reaction against the anecdotal and imaginative interpretation, the empirical alternatives offer no interpretation at all. They let the numbers, tables and illustrations stand for themselves. They trust that their fear of offering interpretation will be dispersed by overzealous measurement and increasingly detailed columns of description.

These comments touch on only a few of the most common ways that figurines have been treated in publication and how they are processed in museums, on excavations and in people's perceptions of them. A very good, recent, and more inclusive, overview is that of Richard Lesure and the interested reader is directed there for a fuller discussion of other trends in figurine analysis from both the Eurasian and American contexts (Lesure 2002).[16] Each trend and school of thought is, of course, legitimate in itself, within its own conception of scientific or social reality (i.e., Indo-European studies; Eco-Feminism; Naïve Empiricism); indeed how else could the many examples of each have to come to print in reputable journals and in volumes from established academic publishing houses?[17]

Moving forward

Many existing approaches are unsatisfying because they ask the wrong questions: questions about typology and chronology (what is the difference between figurines of Hamangia Type A and Hamangia Type B?); questions about the gender balance of societies and the search for matriarchies and patriarchies (was the Vinča culture dominated by men or women?); and questions about the rosters of pantheons (was the Bird-Goddess or the Bull Consort present?). Most importantly, they ask questions and employ methods

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that betray a radical misconception or ignorance of the complexities and dynamics of material culture and, more critically, of visual culture.[18] There are, however, several important exceptions, studies which take different angles of approach and which push the discussion in new, more exciting directions. It is worth considering these exceptions in more detail.

Representing females

In a major contribution to the study of figurines, Leroy McDermott and Catherine McCoid transformed our understanding of Upper Palaeolithic Venus figurines (McDermott 1996; McCoid and McDermott 1996). Their work is important because it approaches the material from the point of view of the person who made the objects. McDermott and McCoid see parallels between the particular and standardized proportions of female Venus figurines and the view that a pregnant woman would have of her own body (fig. 1.4). Their approach has radical implications for the way we think about Upper Palaeolithic figurines but also for looking at Neolithic anthropomorphs. The status of the image shifts from a sexualized representation viewed by an Other to self-conceptions viewed by one person, who is both the subject and the object. The consequences for understanding the emergence and manipulation of the self, identity and personality are large. How did people in the Upper Palaeolithic or the Neolithic conceptualize themselves? As objects? As beings? How did representations of the human form reshape prehistoric ideas of what it was to be human? What are the consequences of taking account of who is looking and why? What are the consequences of thinking about who is being looked at and why? How could we redefine figurines if we think more deeply in terms of the visual and the roles that the spectator plays and if we examine the power relationships that develop around acts (and mechanisms) of being looked at? What are the politics of looking and being seen? Of wanting to be seen? To be seen in a particular way? To possess particular characteristics of form and of material essence?

In another important paper, Gunnar and Randi Haaland (Haaland and Haaland 1995) wrestle with one of the fundamental, but little investigated, premises of most figurine research: that a figurine is a direct reflection of actual beings, whether they are human or divine. Starting with a critique of Gimbutas and the Mother Goddess movement, the Haalands attack two assumptions: that a predominance of images of women in a society reflects a society in which women hold dominant positions; and that the predominance of female imagery is a characteristic of matriarchic societies. The Haalands examine ethnographic studies of communities that have an abundance of female imagery, and they use their own fieldwork among the Fur of western Sudan.[19] They focus on the relationship between the roles that women play in communities and the presence and uses of female imagery. For example, a richly developed female imagery exists among Fur communities. Its use and meaning is linked to the concept *Bora Fatta* (i.e., white or mother's milk) as well as to particular rituals, colours, substances and intra-group relationships. For the study of figurines, the importance of Fur female imagery is that its meaning emerges in crises of the life cycle and in interpersonal relations, events that usually involve ritual solutions: healing, warfare, circumcision, rainfall. Significantly, these crises and relationships are dominated by men. Fur female imagery is a part of attempts to establish trust and support within a community consisting of poorly developed corporate groups and within which social solidarity is fragile. With the Fur, then, abundances of female

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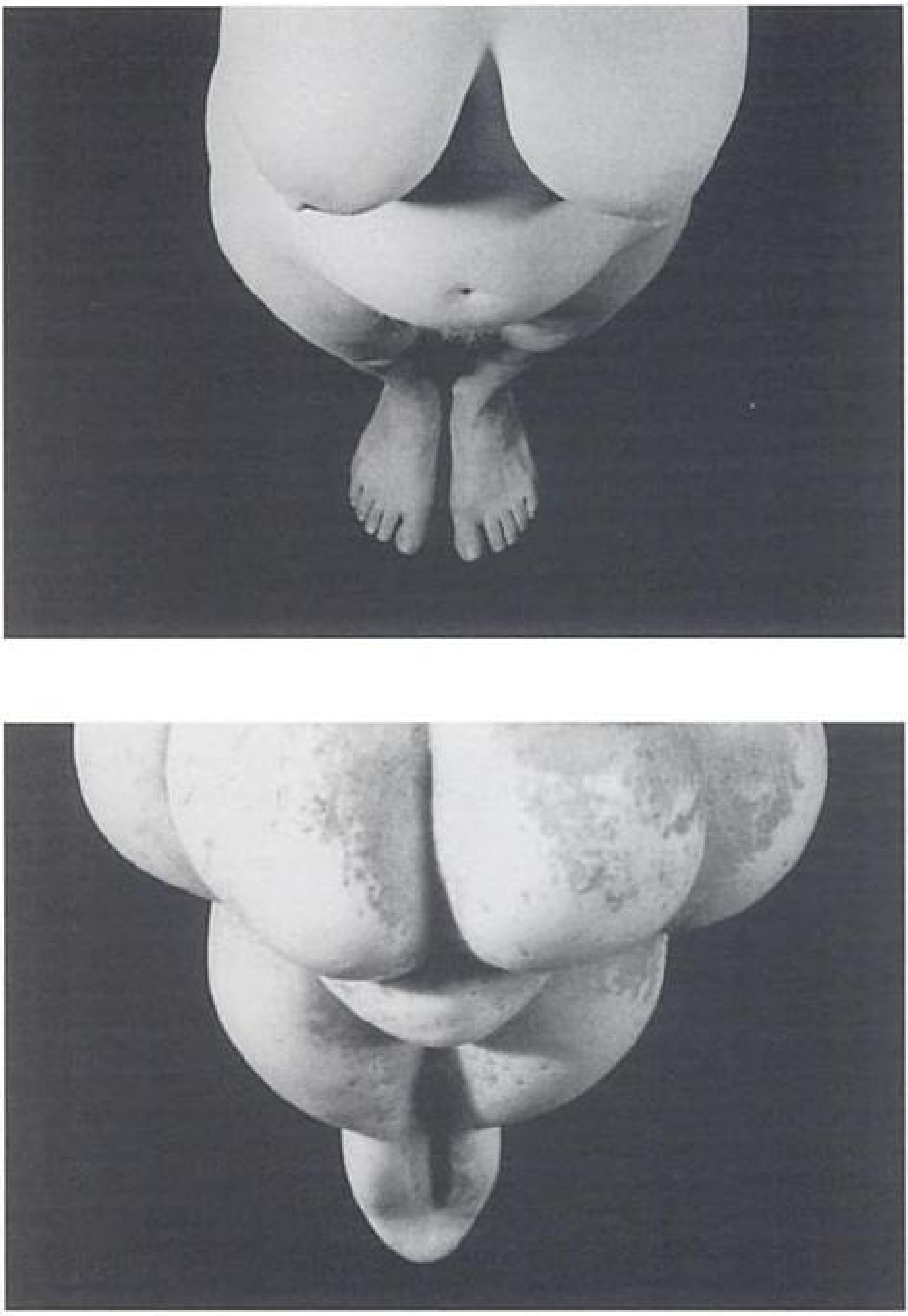

Figure 1.4 Comparison of Palaeolithic figurine and the body of a pregnant woman (after McDermott 1996). Courtesy of Leroy McDermott.

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imagery cannot be read as a reflection of the dominance of women in society. Imagery is involved in deep, complicated systems of meaning and negotiation within communities where men dominate in public.

Clearly, it would be possible to find ethnographic case studies that document a match between abundances of female imagery and female political dominance.[20] The important point is not the dominance-status of the relationship (i.e., do women or men hold positions of social power in communities with abundant female imagery?), nor is it even that many ethnographic case-studies, the Haaland's examples included, suggest that an abundance of female imagery correlates with a subordinated role of women.[21] Rather, the interesting issues are, first, that a relationship between sexed imagery and community power structures exists at all and, second, that it is more frequently expressed and manipulated through images of women and not of men.[22] We are forced to ask why does female imagery work in this way? Why do female symbols possess the potential to evoke particular kinds of associations? What may figurines say about human relationships? Why does an imagery modelled on attributes of the female body convincingly express ways of engaging these relationships? Critically, the Haalands distinguish between asking what a figurine is an *image of* and asking what a figurine is an *image for*. To ask the latter question demands that we accept that figurines are active material representations and that there is an inherent potential within such material to affect people and their perceptions of reality.

In her study of Early Iron Age Greek bronze figurines, Susan Langdon adds further dynamism to the relationship between the gender of representations and social reality (Langdon 1999). Langdon suggests that asymmetries in male and female figurines reveal new strategic uses of gender to validate imbalances in male and female roles in the development and participation in Iron Age cult. The majority of figurines (81 per cent) are male. Male figurines are depicted engaged in a greater range of activities than are the female figurines. Furthermore, male figurines depict more dynamic activities than do female ones: males are shown, for example, herding animals to sacrifice, drawing back a bow, and working at metal-smithing; females' activities are more passive, for example, standing or holding a pot. Also, in their broader stylistic developments, male figurines are less static than are the female ones; newly introduced types are more often male than they are female. Finally, male figurines depict social identities that refer to life beyond the limits of cult; female ones are restricted to particular cult roles.

Langdon proposes that we understand these patterns in the context of contemporary changes in religion and cult and in attempts by men to dominate the new institutions that result. Between 1000 and 700 BC, religion assumed a greater symbolic value. New cults were founded and existing ones were reorganized. The number of bronze offerings at sanctuaries increased. Langdon argues that bronze anthropomorphic figurines played a role in revising and communicating gender definitions and norms for religious and cult activities. She argues that figurines were used aggressively to propose and reinforce a male domination of religious development. Through the display of bronze figurines, gender emerged as a significant factor within visual discourse. Langdon's work raises important questions about the potential that figurines have for socio-political struggle and for proposing alternatives and inverting the status quo. What is it about the character of figurines that make them potential agents in these contests? Why aren't other objects or other materials employed? What is the socio-political significance of differences in frequencies, activities and styles between male and female images?

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Linda Conroy's discussion of the emergence of gender in the Upper Palaeolithic asks similar questions about figurines and about potential meanings of gendered representations (Conroy 1993). Conroy argues that the interest in distinguishing between male and female imagery in figurines is a product of modern ways of thinking about gender. Provocatively, she suggests that males and females share the same body morphology and that variation is restricted to a common spectrum: variation of the human form. Because of this the important observation is to see how different communities choose to emphasize differences or similarities between humans. Conroy suggests that we think about the conventions used to differentiate between women and other, sex-neutral, beings. In this light, it is easier to understand the significant numbers of figurines that are neither male nor female.[23] Upper Palaeolithic cultural constructs were created through material emphasis on female anatomical attributes. Female sexual morphology underpinned a gendered stereotype; figurines were a medium for projecting that stereotype. For Conroy images are potent mechanisms that influence shared beliefs and attitudes to the world. Gender is a social institution best encountered through practical activities such as looking, describing, categorizing, abstracting and inferring from parts to wholes. Conroy sees a link between Upper Palaeolithic figurines and the emergence of gender. In doing so she asks critical questions. How do conventions of human depiction arise? How are they maintained? How do stereotypes grow? Perhaps most importantly, Conroy forces the question, what is it about these images that makes them convincing, that powers them?

The work of Haaland and Haaland, McDermott and McCoid, Langdon and Conroy suggests that, at the very least, the presence of male or female imagery cannot be read as a simple reflection of social organization, structure or reality. At a more penetrating level, they deflate the Mother Goddess readings. As it is invoked for Neolithic southeastern Europe, the principal of Mother Goddessism is the equation of a dominance of the female imagery with the dominance of the status and power of women over men (Meskell 1998: 53). The rupture of the link between female imagery and female dominance has major, undoubtedly fatal, consequences for adherents to the Goddess anecdotes.[24] Mother Goddess-bashing aside, the Haalands' research and Meskell's arguments open important new debates in the study of prehistoric figurines and generate a series of critical questions. What is the status of the representational relationship contained in a figurine? Is it direct and easily read (like a reflection) or is it complex and potentially aggressive, combative and ideological? If representations are political then how do Neolithic figurines engage the contemporary socio-politics? If they are political, then what is it about miniature anthropomorphs that make them succeed as political objects? Why not other objects, materials, or forms of representation? These are the critical questions of a socio-politics of figurines-as-representations which the present book attempts to answer.

Other worlds

As important as the status of representation is the relationship of figurines and other worlds. Important stimulus comes from Christine Morris and Alan Peatfield's study of Bronze Age figurines from Crete (Morris and Peatfield 2002). Morris and Peatfield examine the physicality of gestures depicted in figurines from peak sanctuaries, particularly at the site of Atsipadhes Korakias, and suggest that gesture and body are fundamental to figurine function. The authors read figurines as records of ceremonies in

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and thus remain part of the maintenance of social reality is important. Equally stimulating is the process of animating the figurines by speaking to them and by handling them. By physically engaging the figurines, women entered another world, the one in which the ancestors dwelt, or at least one which both ancestors and living humans could occupy together. Taking this work forward are questions about the ways in which Oaxaca figurines functioned to provide a believable inter-world venue. Why were figurines deemed the acceptable medium for the movement of the ancestors (and of human participants) in the rituals? Why not other categories of material culture? Why were the ancestor depictions represented in three dimensions and not two? What does three-dimensional representation offer that two-dimensional imagery does not? Why did the ancestors need to be represented in a material medium at all? What is so special about the tangible and what actions and thoughts does it facilitate that intangible representation does not? Why could oral presentations and invocations not have functioned just as well? Is there something particularly powerful when several miniature anthropomorphs are grouped together and used as they were in the ritual scenes?

Thinking new thoughts

In his short paper on the aesthetics of Vinča culture figurines, Miodrag Pavlović (Pavlović 1990) offers a glimpse at similar dimensions of figurines that are usually overlooked. Pavlović urges us to think of figurines as attempts to create something that pleases the senses, as something intended to stimulate the imagination. He describes figurines as early models of the human form that are linked to new orders or new conceptions of beings; figurines thus raise critical issues about the ontological dimensions of being human and representing the human. These ideas are exhilarating and provocative. It would be exciting to see these ideas played out through a body of material. It would be particularly stimulating to consider the consequences of such a perspective for our understanding of Neolithic socio-politics. Pavlović raises the point, perhaps obvious, but never directly addressed in detail, that as representations, Neolithic figurines are merely abstractions and do not provide complete or exact portraits; what does it say about Neolithic people that figurines are only abstractions? In his brief note, Pavlović shifts the discussion in important directions.

In a detailed attempt to recover figurine meaning, Peter Biehl studied almost 400 figurines from 33 sites of the Gradeshnitsa-Krivodol culture (Biehl 1996, 2003). The analysis combined a compilation of the motifs that appear on the bodies of Gradeshnitsa-Krivodol figurines and a rigorous statistical testing of the location of different motifs on different parts of the body. Biehl's work is important as it focuses on the figurines themselves as material culture and because it sets aside assumptions of anecdotal meaning and interpretation. Meanings are not assigned but patterns of important symbols are documented. Importantly, Biehl recognizes that the whole concept of anthropomorphic representation was as abstraction of the human body. Indeed, as Pavlović had noted, Neolithic figurines are not complete representations. What is the significance of these observations? What does it mean that the humans depicted are not realistically portrayed? Biehl suggests that the symbols on the figurines sent abstract messages to the people who saw and used them. What is the significance of the abstractness of the symbols and of the human form? Do these conditions help us to better understand the ways in which people thought about them?

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Also provocative is Ruth Tringham and Meg Conkey's critique of Palaeolithic and Neolithic figurine studies (Tringham and Conkey 1998). Tringham and Conkey suggest that we should devote more effort to reconstructing and understanding the use-lives of anthropomorphs: how were figurines modified, used, broken, reused, repaired, decorated, disposed of? Tringham provides a case-study of the figurines from her excavations at Opovo in Serbia (ibid.: 29–35). She grounds her analysis firmly in a contextual study of the locations in which figurines were found at the site. She argues that people intentionally deposited them outside of houses, and she suggests a strong link between the use or meaning of pits (where most figurines were found) and the use or meaning of the figurines themselves. The analysis is rigorous, based on detailed excavation recovery techniques and opens up new and destabilizing questions: why was it that, at Opovo, figurines were the objects that were intentionally deposited in these places and in these ways?

Tringham and Conkey argue that figurine analysts need to probe the broader implications of the meanings and roles played by representational material culture. They urge us to ask new questions. Why would Upper Palaeolithic or Neolithic people have found images of females meaningful? What is the significance of making a miniature of the human form? If some of the Neolithic figurines appear to wear masks, then what is the significance of covering the face and, in particular, why do so few of the masked figurines have mouths depicted? They suggest that we should speak about anthropomorphic objects and not of 'figurines'. They urge us to ask how objects such as figurines work within the construction, enactment and transformation of ideologies and the negotiations of power relations.

More questions

Even though in these examples archaeologists acknowledge the complexity and ambiguity of life and of visual culture, they resist moving beyond a preliminary level of understanding. I have neither the intention nor the expert knowledge to deny that particular anthropomorphic figurines may have worked within politically motivated misrepresentations of power structures, or that others played a role in the emerging dominance of new elites. Indeed many figurines may have functioned as images of divinities or ancestors who were worshipped. These suggestions for figurine function are not assessable. No mechanisms exist for evaluating the accuracy of anecdotal suggestions. It is not simply a matter of developing a more complex set of hypotheses or applying a more rigorous statistical analysis, or even of acquiring better contextual information during excavation, of wet-sieving and of 100 per cent sampling. In the end, our inability to assess these propositions is not important; even if you and I could prove (or even agree) that a particular figurine represents a goddess or an ancestor, both the proof and the equation are irrelevant.

Proof and equation are irrelevant because it is not of primary importance for us to know what is represented by a figurine. Is it of interest? Yes. But, is it fundamental to a fuller understanding of prehistoric figurines? No. It is more important to understand the ways in which miniature anthropomorphic representations succeeded in being the political tools, goddess images, votive offerings or ancestor portraits that different figurine analysts have suggested. How and why could figurines play the roles that they did in domestic negotiations of identity, in the manifestation of the other-worldly, in the presencing of

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the deceased? Why weren't these roles filled by other types of material culture? Why not by oral culture? Why not by other media of representation or other objects? Why not by objects made by different raw materials? What are the powers and consequences of representation in general and of representation of the human body in particular? What is the significance of human representations made in miniature? What of anthropomorphs modelled in three dimensions?

These are the questions that this book asks. In doing so it moves the debate forward in important ways; it bypasses the arguments about Mother Goddessism; isn't it important enough, on its own, to accept that modern men and women think that these figurines are images of an Earth Mother? It bypasses the debates over the proportion of male to female representations in figurine corpuses; isn't it better to focus on the consequences of representing the human form? It even ignores the calls for fully contextual analysis; will total recovery of figurines from a site or the millimetre-specific recording of the location of all finds around a figurine really help us understand how the object was perceived in Neolithic minds?

A new approach

It would be easy to choose any of the examples presented in the preceding section of this chapter and simply play it out against the figurine material and archaeological context of the Balkan Neolithic. Indeed the interpretation that Marcus develops for Formative figurines at Oaxaca fits the Balkans with seductive ease: the recovery of figurines from household contexts; the predominance of female figurines; the fragmentary nature of the material; the contemporary social and economic conditions; the similar disappearance of figurines at the end of both the Formative and the Neolithic; their replacement by similar phenomena (drinking vessels and the rise of more individualized ancestor respect or rituals). To apply any of Marcus' interpretations to the Balkan Neolithic would be a mistake, regardless of the strength of the analogy; such an application would get us no closer to understanding how and why figurines work. In this book I have preferred to follow the questions provoked by the studies outlined above. This book is about asking a different set of questions about prehistoric figurines. It asks why figurines work in the ways suggested by the research reviewed above. It is a teasing apart of figurines as material and visual culture, as representation and as socio-politics.

The book suggests that figurines are unsettling, that they work within a vortex of contradictions and paradoxes. Because figurines are unsettling and paradoxic, people react to them in irrational ways. The best example of such irrational reactions is the enormous body of figurine literature that follows both the anecdotal and the overly empirical approaches. Part of the project of this book is to ask what causes this reaction, both for modern western archaeologists, curators, publishers and antiquities' auctions as well as for Neolithic inhabitants of southeastern Europe. Why do figurines have the effect that they have on people as they observe or handle them?

Based on these questions, three main types of inquiry will follow. First this book investigates the phenomena of miniaturism and three-dimensionality (Chapter 2). What is the significance of a figurine's miniaturism? What happens when an object is reduced in scale? What effects does miniaturizing have on a person looking at and handing objects like figurines? Is it significant that figurines are three-dimensional? What is specific to three-dimensional objects that set them apart from two-dimensional things? Next, this

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book considers the phenomenon of anthropomorphism and the socio-politics of representation (Chapters 4, 6 and 8). Does the human form have particular evocative powers that are not present in other representation? What is the political potential of figurines when they are defined as visual culture? How do representational objects work to support and, more provocatively, to block and invert, existing power structures? Indeed what is representation and what are the consequences of the material representation of the human form?

These investigations proceed with reference to studies and analyses of many different disciplines, regions and periods. Throughout, I assume that despite vast differences in the material, environmental and economic matters, the cognitive abilities of Neolithic and modern people are the same.[28] Thus, the discussion that follows includes many topics and examples not normally associated with the Balkan Neolithic, let alone prehistoric archaeology. Examples from the history of photography, research into the human perception of scale and perspective, the development of anatomical dolls for interviewing child victims of sexual abuse, André Kertész's surrealist photography, Walker Evans' and James Agee's project on tenant farmers of the US Depression, the Barbie Doll, Renaissance architectural tools, nineteenth-century *cartes-de-visite*, the provocations of the Young British Artists of the late 1990s, and the collaborative work of Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keefe. There are many other touchstones with the modern world.

While this book is firmly set in discussions of these modern examples, it also wrestles with the particularities of the data: Neolithic figurines. The photographs that started this book provide the first engagement with the material of the period and they hint at the direction in which it is heading. There are chapters on figurines from three regional varieties of Balkan Neolithic figurines: Hamangia (Chapter 3), Cucuteni/Tripolye (Chapter 5) and Thessaly (Chapter 7). These chapters are not exhaustive reviews of work on these regional variations, nor are they complete typologies and chronologies of the material, though reference to the key works and sequences is provided. Rather, the intention is to let the material work through some of the ideas that are argued for in the more theoretical chapters: i.e., on miniaturism, anthropomorphism and the socio-politics of representation.

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MINIATURISM AND DIMENSIONALITY

In the late 1970s Henrietta Todorova directed the excavation of the fifth millennium BC village at Ovcharovo in northeastern Bulgaria (Todorova *et al.* 1983). In the debris of a building in one of the later phases of the village's long life the team uncovered a collection of 26 miniature objects (fig. 2.1). Included are the following objects.

Four anthropomorphic figurines, each of which is of similar size and shape, each decorated with red-painted design, and each *c.* 8.0 cm tall. Arms reach out from the shoulders or curve gently upwards. Heads, without facial features (though one has a pinched face that models a nose), taper upwards from the neck. Painted decoration is restricted to chest-shoulders and waist-hips-thighs; both areas are densely covered with rectilinear and, in one case, curvilinear designs.

Three standing, footed, two-sided, rectilinear clay plaquettes, each measuring no more than 6.0 cm wide and 5.0 cm high. Surfaces are decorated with painted sets of lines that run to the plaquettes' edges: concentric circles or perpendicular, crossing lines and sets of angles fill surface centres.

Eight chairs and three tables. The tables are square, four-legged and squat; one has small raised dots at each corner of the surface. Chairs are also squat and four-legged; each has an arched back. Neither tables nor chairs are decorated.

Three bowls and two pans. Bowls are small (2.0 cm in dia.), generic, open, rounded forms. Each has a separate lid. Bowls are undecorated; the top surfaces of the lids have

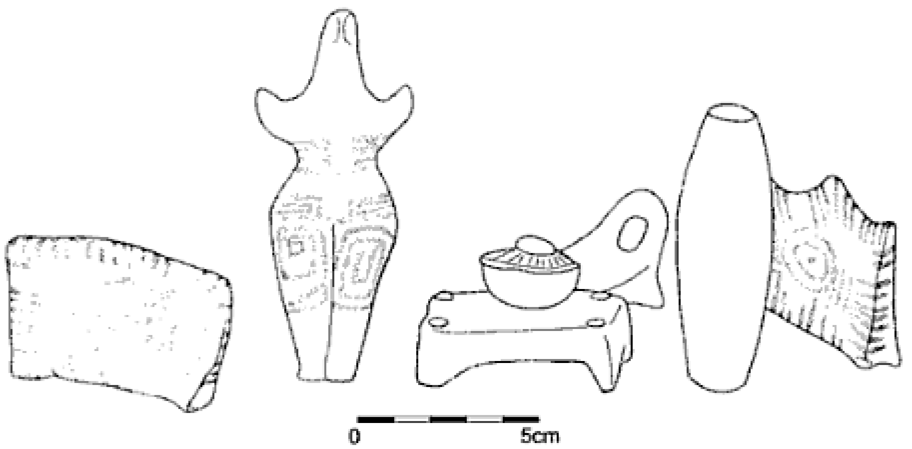

Figure 2.1 Miniature objects from Ovcharovo (after Todorova and Vajsov 1993).

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to-object) and only three significant size categories: life-size, smaller than life-size, and larger than life-size. Thus, thinking about representations in the scale-to-human is a different exercise to thinking in terms of scale-to-original. Thinking of the relationship between the body and the thing-reduced forces us down into an anthropocentric world where the scale of the human dictates all spatial relationships.

Thinking about size reduction in the human scale has important consequences for understanding Neolithic figurines because, unlike cars, trains or architectural models, figurines are anthropomorphic representations. Depicting the human is a large and complex action and a full discussion follows in Chapters 4 and 6. Before we reach that discussion we need to further define small things, specifically by illuminating the critical distinction between a model and a miniature.

Models

Models are attempts at precision. They strive to reproduce an original in a factual manner. They seek exactitude and completion. The goal is to reproduce reality in reduced dimension with the maximum detail retained. Models are accurate and authentic (King 1996: 19, 227). The architect's presentation models are good examples of this principal. Since the early fifteenth century, architects have used models of buildings for a variety of purposes (Millon 1994). Building models serve a variety of purposes: as teaching aids, as guides and templates during construction, as prototypes subjected to tests (e.g., for wind shear), as entries in competitions and tenders for contracts, or as presentations to potential clients (for approval) and authorities (for permissions).

In all of these uses, the model buildings rely on the accuracy with which the modeller is able to reproduce the proportioned details of the original structure. In a similar way, if not necessarily for the same purposes, many other types of factual models pursue accuracy in their manifestations: ship models (in bottles, naval museums or elsewhere); model steam engines; metal and plastic pre-made or Airfix car kits; lead, tin or plastic soldiers, and creatures from history or science fiction. These factual models evoke strong, perhaps subconscious, reactions that are powered by the viewer's recognition of the skills required to work at small scale and of the knowledge of the original that is required to model authentically. Similar responses are generated by tiny books, paintings or other nano-art (fig. 2.2) (Rugoff 1997, 2000; Stewart 1997). We react to these objects with wonder, with respect for the abilities and dedication displayed by the creators, the artists, the modellers in their quest for reproducing accuracy at tiny scales.

Miniatures

Miniatures are different from models. Miniatures are small things that do not seek accuracy in representation, that are not precise or exact. Furthermore, miniatures result from human experimentation with the physical world (Lévi-Strauss 1972); they are cultural creations. In this sense there are no naturally occurring miniatures; each one is a person's utilization of eye and hand to manipulate the world (Stewart 1993: 55; 1997: 79). Good examples are the tiny trees and the tiny landscapes that make up *bonsai*, scholars' rocks and *penjing*.

Bonsai (or the Chinese *punsai* or *pensai* from the Chinese characters *Pen-tsui*) have been popular in the West since the Second World War. Though the histories of growing small

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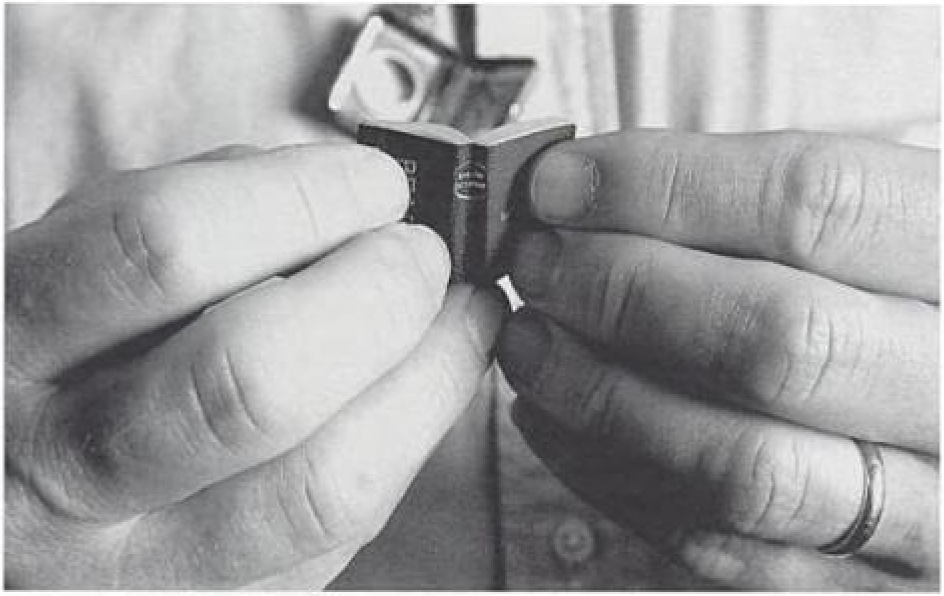

Figure 2.2 Miniature book from the collections of Stanford University's Green Library.

potted plants in Japan and China are very deep, any search for a single origin or meaning of processes of *bonsai* meets with failure.[2] *Bonsai* are natural trees made small. It is a replacement of the complexity of the life-size tree with the simplicity of convention. *Bonsai* compresses information and detail about the texture of bark, the subtleties of colour, and the structure of fine branches (fig. 2.3) (Fontanills 1997). Similar processes are at work in other oriental nature arts such as scholars' rocks and *penjing*.

Scholars' rocks are stones that have been sculpted into evocative, richly textured miniature landscapes (R. Rosenblum 1997, 2001; C. Brown 1997; Stuart 1997) (fig. 2.4). They provide a physical stimulus, a tangible yet imaginary vehicle for travel through an imagined landscape. The rock sitting on a scholar's desk both provides a concrete reality and suggests places that belong to the other worlds of established mythologies. Scholars' rocks work because they posses the capacity to suggest imaginary retreats; while some detail stimulates memory, the specific details, of cloud and water for example, are left to the viewer's imagination (C. Brown 1997: 57, 75). Similar phenomena are the *penjing*: tray-sized landscapes made up of artistically created miniature versions of natural scenes (C. Brown 1997: 57; Zhao 1997: 112). *Penjing* have a deep history in Chinese scholarly art, dating from the Qin and Han Dynasties (221 BC–AD 220) with origins resting in the class of *penjing* literati, a stratum of erudite men of high literary education and cultural sophistication, who shared an aesthetic based on four concepts: aloofness (*gugao*); sparseness (*jianjie*); refined elegance (*ya*); and plainness (*pingdan*) (Zhao 1997: 7).

Perhaps most significant to an understanding of miniaturism is the concept of sparseness (*jianjie*) and its reference to the viewer's perception of complex patterns in objects and phenomena which appear at first sight to be very simple (Zhao 1997: 51–3. In representing trees, rocks and landscapes, the artists creating *bonsai*, scholars' rocks and *penjing* manipulate scale to transform the real world into separate, intimate alternatives (R. Rosenblum 2001: 47; Stein 1990: xxii). They create images of reality that flip back

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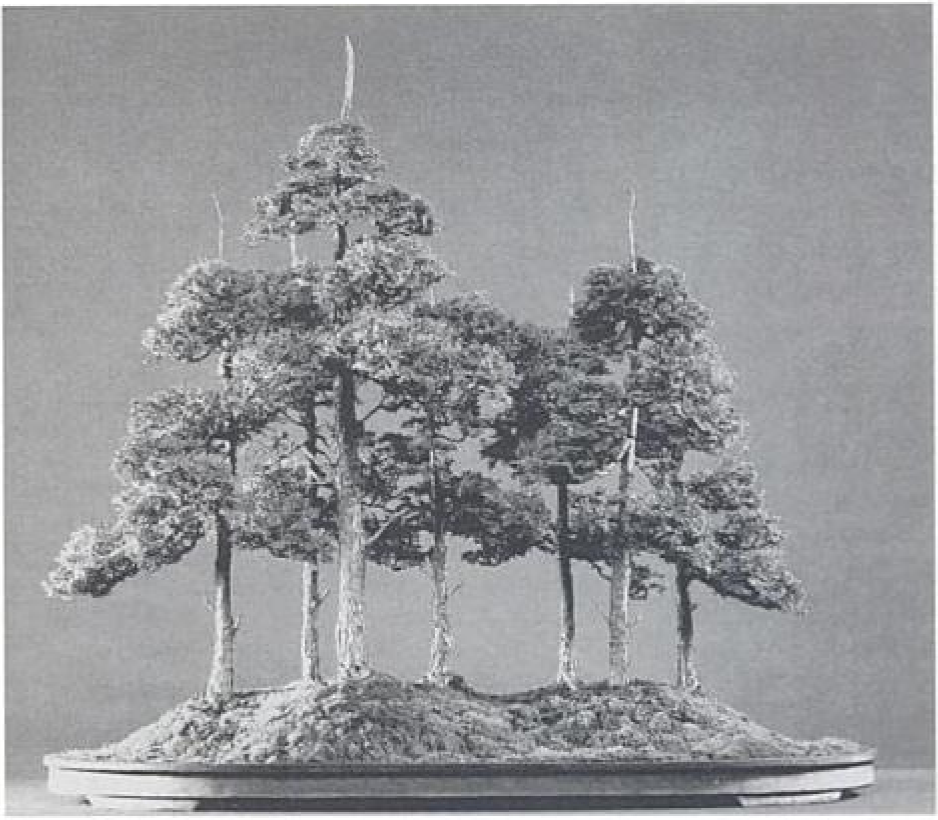

Figure 2.3 Bonsai tree (after Koreshoff 1984). Courtesy of Deborah Koreshoff.

Figure 2.4 Penjing tray landscape (after Koreshoff 1984). Courtesy of Deborah Koreshoff.

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and forth between the natural and the cultural worlds (R. Rosenblum 2001: 21). In flipping from one to the other and then back again, these miniature creations transform viewers' ways of seeing and thinking.

Bonsai, scholars' rocks and *penjing* are very different from models of ships, cars or buildings. They are manipulations of the form and content of an original in order to create something that does not exist but which retains some reference to the real world. *Bonsai* are trees, they are alive, but they are not natural; they have been radically manipulated. *Bonsai*, *penjing* and scholars' rocks are not only different ways of seeing the world, they present alternative realities. They are miniature manipulations.

Abstraction and compression

Miniature manipulation of reality works from two processes: abstraction and compression. Miniaturism's reduction of size is more than mere diminution of physical dimensions: miniaturizing reduces detail. The resulting, intentional, understatement provides much of the power of a miniature because miniaturism demands selection. One result of abstraction is that the viewers of a miniature are cheated. They are not shown everything nor are they shown the full detailing of those elements that are selected for representation. The fact that some elements are not included in the miniature critically warps the relationship between the observer and the representation and, unavoidably, radically, alters the observer's understanding and comprehension of the object. The brevity that comes with abstract representation forces the viewer beyond the information that is provided. The abstraction of a miniature demands that the spectator draw inferences.[3] Thus, a person who contemplates a *bonsai* in a pot or a scholar's rock on a desk or who stares at a Neolithic figurine in its case in the museum or as it is uncovered in an excavation trench, is drawn, almost without realizing it, to think of what is not there, of what has been left out. Where are the other trees? Where are the little birds that should surround the *bonsai*? Where is the rest of the mountain evoked by the scholars' rock? Where is the detail of human expression on a faceless figurine?

Through abstraction, a miniature is an object made active; it forces the viewers to do something that otherwise they would not do. Making the viewer draw inferences about what is not represented in a Neolithic figurine or a *bonsai* tree has important consequences for the understanding that the viewer develops about the miniature object. Critically, the range of inferences that any one viewer can draw are almost limitless; constraints depend only on each viewer's beliefs, understandings, interests, backgrounds and desires. The potential for a miniature to stimulate different inferences means that the responses and understandings of a miniature object, such as a figurine, are many. In this sense then, miniatures are critically opposed to factual models which, though capable of evoking powerful reactions (of awe and respect), aspire to precision and accuracy. As miniature objects, figurines do not propose exactitude, complete knowability or comprehensive meaning. On the contrary, via forced inferences, they suggest that there are many different meanings and reactions, all of which, within reason, are equally valid.

Compression further contributes to the distancing of miniaturism from factual modelling. In addition to the power that it derives from abstraction, miniaturism gains force from its inherent condition of compression. In miniatures, values are enriched. Miniaturism concentrates and distils what is normal in peoples' routine day-to-day activities and thoughts and then produces a denser expression of a part of that reality. At

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the same time as miniaturism reduces elements and properties it multiplies the weight of the abstracted remainder.[4]

The effects of miniaturism on the viewer/handler

Understood in terms of abstraction and compression, miniatures have important effects on the person seeing or handling an object such as a figurine. First, miniaturism enlarges the spectator. Physically, it makes the viewer gigantic, omnipotent and omniscient. It insists on a transcendence by the viewer. Thus, miniaturism empowers the spectator. It allows physical control over a homologue of a thing; intellectually it facilitates a better understanding. With a miniature, knowledge of the whole precedes knowledge of the parts and this gratifies the intelligence (R. Rosenblum 2001: 21). By reducing the world-at-large's reality, a miniature provides a way of making sense of that world. Literally, it makes the world manageable (Betz 1998). Furthermore, miniaturism comforts the spectator. By providing the better understanding and physical control over a thing, miniaturism suggests security and thus brings pleasure. By creating a world in which the human scale matters most and dictates all spatial relationships, miniaturism reassures and liberates the viewer. In doing so and in making the viewer powerful and all-knowing, a miniature object makes the viewer free to indulge in flights of fantasy (Darling 1998). Finally, and perhaps paradoxically, miniaturism unsettles the spectator. It confronts and stimulates the viewer in a way that would not usually occur in such abstracted and compressed forms.

One of many good examples of how miniaturism liberates the viewer, freeing him to indulge in fantasy is the work of Michael Ashkin, an artist who creates table-top industrial and urban landscapes (fig. 2.5). In these works, one of Ashkin's intentions is to give the viewer a better sense of how people have degraded the earth's environment; Ashkin's miniature landscapes are full of industrial debris and abandonment, of asphalted and paved space. In his pieces, Ashkin reproduces the damaged landscapes of our cities in miniature; the work affords the viewer a better sense of the environment's degradation at the hands of men, as well as the haunting beauty of this decay (Model World 2002: 3).

Ashkin has worked at 1:89 scale, though he eventually settled on 1:160 scale (i.e., N-scale in the world of railroad modelling). The choice of the correct size to work in was a measured decision. For Ashkin, there always has to be enough detail so that the viewer can feel what it would be like to actually stand on the surface of his miniature landscapes. When this is possible, the viewer looks at the piece and the viewer's self changes size to accommodate the change in scale. Ashkin's decision about the correctness of the scale to use takes us back to the essentialness of the human scale. Basically, at some point the scale gets too small and the viewers can no longer project themselves bodily into the piece. In Ashkin's words, 'it is as if a smaller version of myself/not myself is in the tiny landscape and, for this new version of myself, different possibilities become newly available' (Ashkin pers. comm. 2002). While creating his miniatures, Ashkin feels himself stepping into the scaled-down space so that he can experience the results of his work; when he needs to add a new piece to the work and has to walk over to the table-saw to cut the piece, Ashkin feels himself stepping out of the miniature world. When making his miniature landscapes, he is drawn into their worlds in a narcotic way.[5] It was as if, for the duration of the creative process, Ashkin exists within the separate space of the

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